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Henry VI: A Reconsideration

Tsuneo Masaki

It is now a commonplace that Shakespeare's nine Histories (excluding *Henry VIII* for the present purpose) form a unique whole. What is not noticed as often is the rich variety in the unity. Anyone will be struck by the wide range of Shakespeare's genius if he compares *Henry VI* with *Henry IV* or *Richard III* with *Richard II*. The difference is found not only across the boundary of the "tetralogies" but also within each of the groups. One is only puzzled at the fact that plays as different as *Richard II* and *Henry IV* should belong to the same tetralogy. It is possible to argue that the latter was clearly conceived as a sequel to the former, but it is a dangerous practice to classify a literary work according to its plot. Both in its dramatic form and poetic style *Richard II* is about as different from *Henry IV* as *Henry VI* is from, say, *Saint Joan*. Yet the fact remains that Shakespeare was conscious of a pattern as he worked on the Histories. The pattern was provided by the chronicles and it formed an important part of Elizabethan thought. That Shakespeare took this pattern quite seriously is shown by the order in which he wrote the Histories. That stretch of history treated by Hall in his chronicle Shakespeare divided in two. For some unknown reason he began with the latter half and after completing the first series, had a break in *King John*, but apart from these aberrations he stuck to the chronology of history once he had made the division. The great variety of his style in the historical cycle seems all the more amazing when one remembers that all the time he was working on one kind of material whose outstanding feature is a strong unifying idea. Shakespeare's attitude towards his sources is certainly not that of a servant to his master, but in the Histories he had not as much freedom as he had elsewhere because he could not make any basic change in the facts. These considerations lead us to assume that what Shakespeare did in the Histories is not to modify his material so as to fit his new style (as he did in *King Lear*) but to utilize a subtle difference in his material to develop a new style. This is particularly true of the second tetralogy. The moving lyricism of *Richard II* would not have been possible unless Richard had been a deposed king. The absence of Falstaff from *Henry V* can only be explained by the kind of play it is—a glorification, though slightly tarnished, of the "victorious acts" of Henry V, which was the only possible treatment of a king nearly deified

by the Elizabethans.

The first tetralogy, on the other hand, forms a far more congenial whole than the second. All the four plays are characterized by the dead seriousness with which the author dramatizes history; it seems that he has not acquired that detachment from history which enables him to produce a peculiarly ambiguous effect in *Henry IV*. Nevertheless, a careful reading, especially of the three Henry plays, will reveal that they already contain in an embryo form all the qualities that will become dominant in the later series. Within the scope of this short study it will not be possible to give more than a few illustrations, but their importance can never be exaggerated. *Henry VI* has so often been regarded as a product of Shakespeare's apprenticeship that few people seem to take it seriously as dramatic art. A telling blow was dealt, too, by the doubts, raised by Malone and then by others including J. Dover Wilson, as to its authenticity in the Shakespeare canon. After all the concessions have been made to those "revisionists", the fact remains that the play is "eminently actable", in the words of a stage director. "If the author was not Shakespeare", he says in a preceding sentence, "I can only regret that the writer in question did not give us more examples of his genius."[1]

His genius, however, does not lie in his craftsmanship alone; it should also be found in his unique insight into history. A good example is Part I where he dramatizes a decisive moment in history by juxtaposing two worlds, each with its own values and standards. One of them is represented by Talbot, "the noble chevalier"(I V, iii) and the other by the younger generation in the play—York, Warwick, Somerset, Suffolk. Talbot stands for the feudal past of which he is the last flower. (It should be remembered that the Hundred Years' War that gives the framework to Part I was the last medieval war.) For him honour and valour are still living virtues; when captured, he refuses to be ransomed for "a baser man of arms by far" (I, iv) than himself. York's generation, on the other hand, are characterized by their political realism in which the word "valour", for example, has shed all its chivalric connotations:

> It is war's prize to take all vantages;
> And ten to one is no impeach of valour. (Pt. III, I, iv)

In order to describe the negation of the old world by the new, Shakespeare makes some drastic changes both in chronology and events. He antedates the death of Talbot by about a quarter of a century and finds its cause, quite unhistorically, in the conflict of the roses.[2] Talbot is surrounded by the French forces and waits for the rescue, which never arrives

because each of the young politicians, York and Somerset, thinks it more "politic" (a typical Elizabethan word with its Machiavellian connotation) to make a mess of the campaign and later to blame it on his opponent. This device, and Shakespeare's vision of history from which it derives, make the play not only a national epic as many people take it to be, but also a shrewd picture of changing attitudes towards basic human values. Shakespeare's treatment of his brave hero in Part I is for the most part unambiguous. An important exception is IV, viii where Lucy arrives from the English camp to "survey the bodies of the dead". When asked "whom thou seekest", he begins:

> But where's the great Alcides of the field,
> Valiant Lord Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury,
> Created for his rare success in arms
> Great Earl of Washford, Waterford, and Valence...

His bombastic eloquence is exploded into the air by the sharp retort of Joan la Pucelle:

> Here's a silly-stately style indeed!
> The Turk, that two and fifty kingdoms hath,
> Writes not so tedious a style as this.
> Him that thou magnifi'st with all these titles,
> Stinking and fly-blown lies here at our feet.

The irreverence is perfectly in character; Shakespeare endeavours throughout to establish the image (a conventional one) of Joan as a foul-mouthed, equivocating witch. All the same, the effect of the scene is surprisingly ambiguous. The irony is there for anyone to see, and to follow the death of a hero with an irony is an extraordinary thing not easily to be explained away. Perhaps we are justified in thinking that Shakespeare shows the "valour" of Talbot to be a thing of the past which may even look ridiculous in the world to come. The scene is reminiscent of that famous passage in a later play where Falstaff in his immortal speech achieves a final desecration of "honour". It is possible that in the dialogue quoted above Shakespeare anticipates by nearly a decade his greater achievement in the later play.

Many of the ironic scenes of *Henry VI* are associated with an effective use of the stage. The peculiar form of the Elizabethan stage, about 30 feet deep and surrounded by the audience on three sides, enables the dramatist to have two groups of people on the stage, one up- and the other downstage, so that the latter can comment ironically on what the former is doing. This is the device Shakespeare is to develop greatly in his mature plays, and the

most consistent use he makes of it is found in *Troilus and Cressida* which as a result becomes Shakespeare's most ambiguous play.

An example is found in Part III, III, ii where King Edward woos Lady Grey and thus breaks the oath he made to Warwick before he left for France to arrange the royal marriage.

> *K. Edward.* How many children hast thou, widow, tell me.
> *Clarence.* (*Aside to Gloucester*) I think he means to beg
> a child of her.
> *Gloucester.* (*Aside to Clarence*) Nay, then, whip me; he'll
> rather give her two.
> *Lady Grey.* Three, my most gracious lord.
> *Gloucester.* (*Aside*) You shall have four if you'll be ruled
> by him.

Shakespeare's ironic treatment of Edward is interesting because Hall gives this Yorkist king a chapter of his chronicle entitled: "The prosperous reign of King Edward the Fourth". Shakespeare ignores the "prosperous reign" and concentrates on the ignoble side of the king "giuen to fleshly wantonness".[3]

Another example is the notorious Jack Cade scenes in Part II. The scenes are a persistent satire on the Kentish revolt of 1450. Their brutal tone has baffled many readers who wish to keep intact the image of Shakespeare the "popular" dramatist. In his first appearance on the stage, Cade is already shown in a ridiculous light.

> *Cade.* We John Cade, so term'd of our supposed father—
> *Dick.* (*Aside*) Or rather, of stealing a cade of herrings.
> *Cade.* My father was a Mortimer—
> *Dick.* (*Aside*) He was an honest man and a good bricklayer...
> *Cade.* My wife descended of the Lacies—
> *Dick.* (*Aside*) She was, indeed, a pedler's daughter,
> And sold many laces. (IV, ii)

It is possible to see in these scenes a reflection of Shakespeare's class instinct which becomes alarmed at any sign of a public commotion. The possibility may increase when we learn that Shakespeare alters the nature of the revolt considerably by adding to it features of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. "The demands of the rebels [in 1450]...are wholly political in character",[4] while those in 1381 are directed at land reform and the abolition of serfdom. Shakespeare may have been horrified by the chronicle account of the latter and projected his horror into his dramatic account of the former. The unusual sensitiveness can perhaps

be explained from his provincial and middle-class origin and his close connection as a result with the land.[5]

What makes the second part of *Henry VI* a great political play is Shakespeare's shrewd vision of the seamy side of politics. Here we have a foretaste of that immortal picture of a political nightmare, *Richard III.* Plots, counterplots, men's passion for power, equivocation, pitiless victimization—those were no doubt things that had immediate relevance in Shakespeare's own age (as they do in ours), and his greatness lies in his power to visualize them from the meagre account in the chronicles.

An interesting example is Hume, the first of Shakespeare's amoral egoists. Hall mentions his name only twice; all he tells us about him is that he was arrested as one of the "ayders and counsailers" to the Duchess in her plot against the crown and that somehow he escaped execution. No mention is made about the counterplot in which he was employed to "undermine the Duchess". That is a pure invention of Shakespeare's. The importance of Hume in the play is not only that he supplies the link, missing in the chronicle, between the Duchess' plot and the downfall of her husband, but also that he is one of the New Men who are to interest Shakespeare so much in his mature plays. The great Machiavellian speech in I, ii prepares the ground for all the Iagos and Edmunds:

> Hume must make merry with the Duchess' gold;
> Marry, and shall. But, how now, Sir John Hume!
> Seal up your lips and give no words but mum:
> The business asketh silent secrecy.
> Dame Eleanor gives gold to bring the witch:
> Gold cannot come amiss were she a devil.
> Yet have I gold flies from another coast—
> I dare not say from the rich Cardinal,
> And from the great and new-made Duke of Suffolk;
> Yet I do find it so;...
> They say 'A crafty knave does need no broker';
> Yet am I Suffolk and the Cardinal's broker.
> Hume, if you take not heed, you shall go near
> To call them both a pair of crafty knaves...

Another invention, or rather intensification of history, is found in the third act of the play. Here the action turns on a political frame-up in which Gloucester is entrapped and finally murdered. It is characteristic of Shakespeare that by reading the pedestrian account of the chronicles he can grasp the true nature of the action and make every detail of his play serve to illuminate that nature. This is not merely the matter of creating plots and characters and of weaving them into a dramatic whole. What I mean is Shakespeare's

peculiar way of looking at things, "of cutting through pretence and getting behind the words that disguise reality".[6] The reader's own comparison of Hall and Shakespeare will be better than pages of explanation. (I will choose a few crucial moments in the scene.)

(1) (Hall)
...a parliament was somoned to be kept at Bery, whether resorted all the peres of the realm, and emongst them, the duke of Gloucester...
(Shakespeare)
Herald. I summon your Grace to his Majesty's Parliament
Holden at Bury the first of this next month.
Gloucester. And my consent ne'er ask'd herein before!
This is close dealing. Well, I will be there.

(2) (Hall)
...the duke of Gloucester...on the second daie of the session, was...arrested, apprehended, and put in warde...
(Shakespeare)
Gloucester. Ah, gracious lord, these days are dangerous!
Virtue is chok'd with foul ambition,
And charity chas'd hence by rancour's hand;...
I know their complot is to have my life;
And if my death might make this island happy...
I would expend it with all my willingness.
But mine is made the prologue to their play...
Buckingham. He'll wrest the sense, and hold us here all day.
Lord Cardinal, he is your prisoner.
Cardinal. Sirs, take away the Duke, and guard him sure.

(3) (Hall)
But his capitall enemies...fearying that some tumulte... might arise, if a prince so well beloved of the people, should bee openly executed...determined to trappe & undoo hym...
(Shakespeare)
Queen. ...Believe me, lords...
This Gloucester should be quickly rid the world
To rid us from the fear we have of him.
Cardinal. That he should die is worthy policy;
But yet we want a colour for his death.
'Tis meet he be condemn'd by course of law...
Suffolk. ...do not stand on quillets how to slay him;
Be it by gins, by snares, by subtlety,
Sleeping or waking, 'tis no matter how,
So he be dead; for that is good deceit
Which mates him first that first intends deceit.

The Cardinal's speech in (3) is of special importance, for it anticipates the words of that

politician-king, Bolingbroke, in *Richard II*, IV, i (the famous deposition scene) :

> Fetch hither Richard, that in common view
> He may surrender; so we shall proceed
> Without suspicion.

Such, indeed, is excellent "policy" —in its ominous Elizabethan sense. The word seems to have worried Shakespeare as he worked on Part II, for he uses it (in the Machiavellian meaning) on six occasions as against one in Part I and none in Part III. It is a useful word, as is "commodity" in *King John*, to define the central theme of the Histories. What Shakespeare did in them was to show the price that "policy" cost mankind.

There are many ways of reading Shakespeare. Some people read him for character, others for poetry. It is even possible to read him for surprises. They rarely come at the first reading, but at a second, or perhaps a third, reading, a sudden light is thrown on the meaning of a human situation by the speech of some minor character that has not drawn our attention before. We feel that the world is not the same as it was a few moments ago, and we are moved. In *Henry VI* we have, for instance, the Mayor's speech in Part I, I, iii. The peace of London has been disturbed by the street fight between Gloucester's and Winchester's men, encouraged by their masters, and a proclamation has been issued against the use of weapons in the city. Peace has returned, and then the Mayor speaks on an empty stage :

> Good God, these nobles should such stomachs bear!
> I myself fight not once in forty year.

An inconspicuous speech no doubt, but it has the effect of reducing the bombastic battle of words that goes before to its true proportions, namely, those of a meaningless brawl.

Or we have Iden in Part II, IV, x reflecting (much as Lear does) upon the evils of court life and the desirability of a secluded life :

> Lord, who would live turmoiled in the court
> And may enjoy such quiet walks as these?
> This small inheritance my father left me
> Contenteth me, and worth a monarchy.
> I seek not to wax great by others' waning
> Or gather wealth I care not with what envy;
> Sufficeth that I have maintains my state,
> And sends the poor well pleased from my gate.

Perhaps Shakespeare did not recognize the irony when he let Iden kill Jack Cade and for that act be knighted and given a place at the court.

Iden's speech takes us immediately to another, more important part of the play. It is Henry's soliloquy in Part III, II, v. The importance of Henry in the play has often been underestimated, and the popular interpretation of him as the ineffectual and rather dull sovereign still persists. J. Dover Wilson has shown that the Henry of the Elizabethans was nothing less than a "royal Saint" and that "despite the incongruities about him...he is the only sketch of a saint in the canon".[7] He rightly points out the affinity of Henry to Richard II, but he does not seem to go much beyond the formal resemblance between the two—their initial unattractiveness and the pathos of their ends.

The soliloquy in question is a famous one containing a passage considered by many as the only passage worth quoting in the play ("O God! methinks it were a happy life/To be no better than a homely swain", etc.). The passage is followed immediately by these lines:

> Gives not the hawthorn bush a sweeter shade
> To shepherds looking on their silly sheep,
> Than doth a rich embroider'd canopy
> To kings that fear their subjects' treachery?
> O yes, it doth; a thousand-fold it doth.
> And to conclude: the shepherd's homely curds,
> His cold thin drink out of his leather bottle,
> His wonted sleep under a fresh tree's shade,
> All which secure and sweetly he enjoys,
> Is far beyond a prince's delicates—
> His viands sparkling in a golden cup,
> His body couched in a curious bed,
> When care, mistrust, and treason waits on him.

The speech is moving in its serene but unflinching realization of what kingship means to a human being. Shakespeare often reveals the true nature of power through the eyes of a loser—mostly, a deposed ruler. There is King Lear, for example, whose long journey of self-discovery begins only after he has given up his crown. Even Prospero can claim a remote kinship, for the depth of his insight and serenity of his mind derive from his self-struggle in his exiled life. Richard II is another name on the list. He is one of the great truth-tellers of Shakespeare but not before he returns from an inconclusive campaign in Ireland to an unfriendly England.

Henry is a loser from the beginning. He was only nine months old when he was crowned, and even while he ruled, he seldom made an effective use of his power, which was

wielded for him first by his uncle and then by his queen. So from the very start he is in much the same position as Richard in the latter half of his play. Yet most of his great speeches are found in Part III—another sign of Shakespeare's genius in conceiving his characters not as static but as constantly changing and developing entities. In Part III Henry has already lost his political value except as a symbol. Battles are still being fought but he has no part to play in them. He is even sent away to Scotland much as a crown is put away in a strong-room for safety. We have a feeling that his creator is already preparing for his death on the stage. It is at this point that Shakespeare puts in his mouth the most deeply moving words in the whole of the trilogy. Henry has just returned from Scotland, in disguise, "To greet mine own land with my wishful sight". The situation has a striking resemblance to that in *Richard II* where Richard, returning from Ireland, weeps "for joy To stand upon my kingdom again" and "salute[s]" the "Dear earth" with his hand. Henry has been talking to himself and overheard by "two Keepers" of the "chase":

> *2 Keeper.* Say, what art thou that talk'st of kings and queens?
> *K. Henry.* More than I seem, and less than I was born to:
> A man at least, for less I should not be;
> And men may talk of kings, and why not I?

The recognition that a king is at least a man and can never be less than that is a great Shakespearean theme; it runs through *Richard II* to *King Lear*. Henry is the first of Shakespeare's self-questioning kings. It is this that makes his death at the end of the play the only truly tragic death in the trilogy.

I have attempted to show that *Henry VI* is something much more than a mere name in the canon. It has its crudities, no doubt, but we already find in it all the qualities that we associate with the later plays in the historical cycle: confrontation of the old with the new, juxtaposition of the tragic and the comic, the cruel and the humane—in short, the strange heterogeneous nature of Shakespeare's art. I would not claim that it is as "eminently" readable as it is actable, but at least it deserves more attention as the earliest example of Shakespeare's method in the Histories.

Notes

1. Sir Barry Jakson, "On Producing *Henry VI*", *Shakespeare Survey*, 6 (1953), 50.

2. Andrew S. Cairncross, The New Arden *1 Henry VI*, xlvi.

3. *Ibid.*, 71.

4. A. L. Morton, *A People's History of England* (1965), 148.

5. For a detailed analysis of a similar phenomenon in *Coriolanus*, see E.C.Pettet, "*Coriolanus* and the Midland Insurrection of 1607", *Shakespeare Survey*, 3 (1950).

6. L.C.Knights, *Some Shakespearean Themes* (1960), 28.

7. J.D. Wilson, The New Cambriege *3 Henry VI*, xxxiv.

(All quotations from Hall are taken from The New Arden *1—3 Henry VI*.).